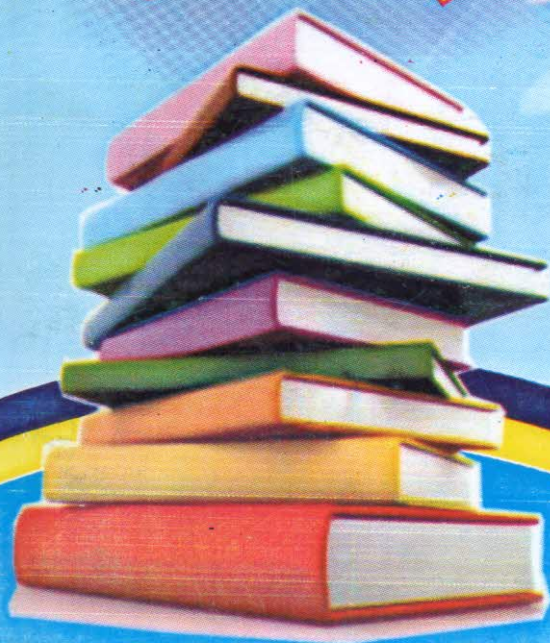


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Dr. P. U. Nwosu

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORALITY AND POLITICS: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

In the present day Africa, with Nigeria as a case study, one observes politics of greed, corruption and violence. The Machiavellian rulership takes the place of people-centered politics and the desire for the common good. In this regard, political leaders at all levels are now unable to procure for the general masses what Aristotle calls "a good life" which is the basic end of any political society. The feeling of utter disgust that the current political trend in Nigeria engenders, throws up the question of the relationship between morality and politics. Applying historical and analytical methods, the paper makes an assessment of the inter-connectedness between morality and politics using Nigeria as a case study. The paper argues that the disconnect between morality and politics always goes with many socio-political ills. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at engineering the country socially and politically.

The very high hopes and expectations that followed the political autonomy of Nigeria in 1960 have now become dashed expectations. The foundation of the dashed expectations and hopes is the dearth of visionary, selfless, morally upright and altruistic political leaders. While, political leadership as a virtue is yet to be cultivated in Nigeria politicians and statesmen, public officials flaunt wealth they could never ordinarily afford neither at home nor elsewhere. "Over the years, we have witnessed the misallocation of public resources and the stealing of the common wealth of the people in the name of national

service. We have watched helplessly how those who hold positions of trusts have abused such positions and wrecked the people's resources".¹ Isiramen underscored the woes and dashed hopes engendered by the divorce of morality from the political landscape of Nigeria thus:

The Nigerian nation is presently weighed down by huge external debts, unemployment, mass retrenchment, armed robbery, assassinations, disinvestments, collapse of infrastructures, food crisis, insecurity,... pervasive poverty, strikes as well as alienating and repressive economic policies.²

To the long list of unpalatable socio-economic and political conditions of the people in Nigeria, one may add the recent effects of climate change, resulting to flooding in most riverine communities in the country. Against the unprecedented collapse of the social, political and economic institutions in Nigeria, any thinking mind cannot but believe that politicians, particularly in Africa, are not by nature directed towards virtue and the common good of the greatest number. Rather, the undeniable and glaring fact is political activities that are radically selfish. Majority of the political leaders tend to be animated by selfish ambition and they construct their politics on this framework. The domain of politics is conceived as a relation of forces which is harnessed and controlled to benefit selected few.

The focus of this paper is on the critical assessment of the interconnectedness between morality and politics using Nigerian society as a reference point. Applying historical and analytical methods, the first section of the paper would attempt to clarify terms and trace the problem of the relationship between morality and politics from the ancient times down to the present century. Subsequent subheadings explore the domain of politics and morality in their classical and modern foundations. To keep track with the objective of the paper, the central question would be whether the domain of politics

is ethically neutral? Is there natural foundation of justice? Is justice or morality consequent upon civil society? Efforts to find answers to these fundamental questions would lead to the conclusion of the paper since politics in Africa is the very place where the end indeed justifies the means. The politician can make use of thugs, murder or any other means, provided they are used with precision to achieve the desired ends.

Morality and Politics: A Clarification

Due to globalization, most countries and people, Nigerians inclusive, live in multicultural realities which have specific moral and political challenges. For example, the issue of legalization of abortion, child-rights and care for the aged are moral and political issues. Countries face these challenges differently. So, speaking of morality and politics today is no easy task. Be that as it may, the task here is to situate morality and politics generally, with a look at their origins, their deepest meanings and main bases.

Morality as a science has a long history. It goes back to the ancient peoples, cultures and religions that produced moral codes by which societies ordered their behaviours and thoughts to enrich human life. Etymologically, the word: "morality" comes directly from the Latin root "mores" meaning custom, manner or action.³ The Greeks preferred the term "ethics" to morality from where ethos is derived. Ethos designates "the force that maintains and nourishes the inner identity of a people".⁴ Morality and ethics, properly understood are fundamentally complementary. Both concepts refer to human activities and action.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that human beings possess moral nature, which imposes upon them a sense of responsibility. They are obliged by their own nature to seek highest good and the highest virtue. For him, morality is a collection of absolutely binding laws by which our actions ought to be governed.⁵ The categorical rule governs human actions as individuals and as social beings.⁶ The concept of morality, therefore, is at the service of human beings as free and

rational agents who perform acts that could be termed licit or illicit in a civil society. In this regard, human beings cannot imagine themselves in a state without moral principles.

The necessity of morality arises because human beings are social animals. In themselves, they are neither fundamentally good nor fundamentally evil; but they must be guided to goodness. Kant makes "practical reason superior to "pure reason" because to be moral for the sake of morality helps to achieve a better society. To buttress this fact, Ndugbu states that, "perhaps the most disinterested reason for performing a moral action is the honest conviction that it is the right thing to do and not other reason".⁷ In other words, morality has to do with human activities (political activities inclusive) that are looked upon as good or bad. The concept highlights conducts that are considered as virtuous, proper and just. It directs the manner in which one behaves in relationship with others in any civil or political society. But are the precepts of morality dependent upon places, periods and persons or are they absolute and valid for all places?

The responses to the above questions vary from one school of thought to another. The natural law theorists who derived their insight from divine command would argue that despite apparent differences in time and place, moral rules are immutable, applicable to every state or conditions under which men may live and universally binding on all. The Stoics are located within this view. They principally believe:

Knowledge of the functioning of the universe as a whole provides us with knowledge and of how each individual thing must behave. Every one must follow the rationale will of the universe and live in conformity with the divine laws of nature, just as everyone must follow and live in conformity with the laws of one's country.⁸

Prominent opponents of the natural laws theory, some contemporary existentialists and dialectical materialists, claim that moral percepts

are subjective, and they argue that they are derived from human's instinct of self-preservation. Acts, for them, are morally good if they promote the self-preservation of the individual and evil if the contrary is the case. Ndugbu sums up the teaching of the opponents of the natural law theory thus:

There is no Divine Being whose commands ought to be obeyed. Man creates his own essence, or rather his values through his everyday choices and it is by so doing that he gives meaning to his life and to his world⁹.

Furthermore, the dialectical materialists, particularly Engels, submit that all morality is always the product of class struggle, the consequence of the economic and political stage which society has reached at that particular time. Engels cites the instance of the injunction. "Thou shall not steal" and argued that "it is only in a state of private property that this moral law is common"¹⁰. For him, this could not be an eternal moral law in a society in which the motive for stealing has been eliminated.

Politics, taken from its ancient root, is the Greek word "polis", meaning city or state. It is "the art and science of taking part in a civilized society"¹¹. That is to say that politics is the consideration of life in common with men and women according to the essential structures of human society. In essence, politics is the science of human affairs, people's happiness and good. Buttressing this fact, Umejesi agrees:

For the Greeks, politics is a noble and indispensable profession involving every member of the city state. Thus,... politics is the most developed part of man's morals: man's full participation is ... achieved by living in intercourse with fellow citizens ... and, preferably involved in the business of government....¹²

In his *Politics* and *Ethics*, Aristotle set out to x-ray what

mode of life human happiness consists and to discover what form of government and social institutions that mode of life can be guaranteed. With these dual tasks, he notes that "it is evident that the state is a creature of nature and that man is by nature a political animal"¹³. For him, as Umejesi averred, the connection between the human person and the state is so close that anyone who is unable to live in society or who has no need of it must be either a beast or a god¹⁴. Politics devoid of selfish ambitions promises to all people happiness, satisfaction and security of lives and property in a perfectly organized manner Umejesi alluded to this point when he said:

Man is destined by nature to live in a state, but the state as every other community or institution is established with a view of some good. Thus, the end or function of the state is to ensure supreme good of man, namely moral and intellectual life.¹⁵

Hence, politics is the field of study which deals with all human problems and develops approaches to their solution to guarantee well being of all people. The goal of politics is the same as that of ethics or morality which is "the vital well-being of the individual"¹⁶. However, some scholars like Augustine, Aquinas and McNabb¹⁷ are of the view that morality and politics are two different categories. They placed their ends at different levels. For example, Augustine located the City of God, which he saw as the domain of morality, over the earthly city that is the place of political activities. In other words, the proponents of this school of thought claim that morality responds to an interior exigency and is concerned with the rectitude of personal acts according to norms of duty each assuming fully the responsibility of his/her own conducts¹⁸. While politics on the other hand, responds to the need of

norms. Ndugbu contemplated this when he wrote "For the classics, there is no distinction between moral life and political life. The good man is one who fulfils ones function as a citizen within the community".²⁷

In the light of the above, Aristotle opined that any state that is truly so called and is not a state in name must pay attention to virtue, for otherwise, the community becomes merely an alliance, differing only in locality from the other alliances, those of allies that live afar.²⁸ Thus, politics and morality are closely linked in any healthy state, be it ancient or contemporary. As Barker says, the polis was as ethical society; and political science as science of such society, became predominantly ethical".²⁹ Politics, then, would remain the social science of the morally permissible despite human frailty. There is no essential difference between political science and ethics. The good of the human person is ideally the same as the good of the society; ones virtue is by implication the virtue of the state. In other words, politics is the supreme ethics.³⁰

Reacting strongly against extreme Sophists who had proposed a politics of self-satisfaction, Plato came up with the idea of justice as a quality of the soul, in virtue of which people set aside all selfish desires and gains. He projected a brand of politics that would make the state cease from being the field for the self-satisfaction of politicians. Plato demonstrated that the state cannot be a chance congeries of persons to be exploited by the strongest individuals but that, on the contrary, that it would be a community of souls rationally and necessarily united for the pursuit of a moral end. Giving an insight to Plato's political and ethical thoughts, Nisbet explains that "a bold effort to show that behind the mercurial world of the senses there is a world of reality accessible to reason alone, a world composed of the timeless real instead of the transitory apparent that is the sole yield of the senses".³¹

Thus, Plato's vision of the political community and politics anchored on rationalism and morality. For him, politics that has its foundation in morality is not only true but also good and beautiful. In this regard, the people qualified to engage in politics are those who care

for the state most and those who care for it most are those who believe that its welfare is their welfare and its mishap their own mishap.

Modern Political Thought and Morality

The most profound conflict that characterized the modern political era was the attempt to eliminate morality from politics. From that moment the problems of socio-political order and ethics set in. Hence, the issue of natural law and natural rights became vivid realities in the modern period so far as philosophers of both politics and religion were concerned³². The consequent result that followed modern political and moral crises was the emergence of a new understanding of nature, politics and morality. The public-spirited program of the classical political thought was substituted with political realism based on the natural inclinations of human beings.

However, there were some scholars who made sincere efforts to sustain the link between politics and morality. Shaftesbury for example, did not deny the tendency of the individual towards self. He notes, 'we know that every creature has a private good and interest of his own, which nature has compelled him to seek'.³³ But, according to him, man being part of a system, must have all his inclinations and affections... suitable and agreeing with the good of his kind or of that system in which he is included and of which he constitutes a part³⁴. Because human beings are social entities, their inclinations cannot be perfectly balanced unless they are in harmony with the larger society.

In trying to discredit the classical political thoughts and sustain the modern socio-political disorder, Machiavelli (1467-1527) taught that human beings are not by nature directed towards virtue. Rather, people are radically selfish and a wise politician will construct his/her politics on this assumption.³⁵ It to be noted that in addressing the questions of means and power in politics, Machiavelli threw up several "immoral" doctrines which influence the style of governance till date. To guarantee political stability in the society, he argues that what is needed is the smartness of a political leader, himself animated by

have shown beyond doubt that a polity without morality can only be a wily contraption that works only for the self interest of the depraved.⁴¹ Nigerians have past and recent experiences as a nation to show for this. Speaking on the topic: "Promotion of Ethics and Integrity in the Courts System and Improving Citizens Access to Justice," Femi Falana noted that Danbata Suntai, the Governor of Taraba State, acted immorally to have abandoned governance in his state to engage in selfish venture. According to him, "the action of Suntai, by attending a pilot course while serving as a governor, is a dereliction of duty and constitutes an impeachable offence under Nigerian law"⁴². Falana went further to describe as irresponsible on the side of a serving governor of one of the flood-ravaged states in the South-South to spend a whopping 50 million dollars to acquire a jet meant to facilitate his law school programme in the United Kingdom. This act of political immorality is committed at the expense of the flood ravage masses in the state. Because morality has no prime place in Nigerian politics, the common good of the greatest number is rendered meaningless, empty and irrelevant.

In the light of the wobbling political experiences in Nigeria, Kant's objective principle of morality becomes instructive. For Kant, a theory of politics is inevitably a part of metaphysics of morality. This is because politics deals with the issue of what one oughts do in a social and political contexts. It is concerned with evolving platforms by which the citizenry can enjoy good governance and receive quality service from their leaders. Kant, therefore, succinctly submitted that "politics ought to be adapted to morality"⁴³. In Kant's estimation, a politician worth his/her onion is one who conceives of the principles of political expediency in such a way that they can coexist with morality. These kinds of politicians are yet to be seen in Nigeria. For now, the country is populated by political gladiators who fashion their morality to suit their own advantages. Nigerian politicians consistently cause misery for their people through their unbridled corruption and their internal economic mismanagement. Yet, they hip the blame on global insecurity and economic recession when, indeed, politics is about

leadership and dynamic visions to guarantee human welfare. In these trying periods of morally devoid politics, Nigeria desperately needs leaders with moral authority and integrity.⁴⁴ To entrench sincerity of purpose and moral integrity into Nigeria political space, the followings are advocated:

- 1) Nigerian politics should shift from being a business enterprise to being a noble profession it ought to be, going by the ideas of ancient Greek political thoughts.
- 2) The idea of "winner take all" and political "bomboyism" that are characteristic of Nigerian politics are no longer fashionable in global political trend. These syndromes should be exterminated from the psychic of Nigeria politicians. Political "bomboyism" in Nigeria has to do with "who gets what, when and how" in the ruling party. This is Nigerian factor. In his remark, after Obama's re-election, Romney, the Republican Presidential Candidate said that he would put partisan politics apart and join hands to build America. This spirit of statesmanship should serve as an inspiration for Nigerian politicians.
- 3) In the 21st century, politicians in Nigeria should work so hard to transcend ethnic, tribal and sectional tendencies; and serve the citizens without undue selfish ambitions. The aim should be to hit the level of political maturity punctuated with moral integrity. It was instructive to note that during the last elections in America, both supporters of Obama and Romney carried and waved American flag, expressing love for America rather than political attachment. Since almost all Nigerian political principles are derived from the American system, then we should be challenged to attain the stage where we love Nigeria as Americans love their country.

The above recommendations, when followed, would put in motion the urgently needed social and political re-engineering in Nigeria to guarantee "desired peace, stability and prosperity"⁴⁵.

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